

QUESTIONS FOR PRIVATE WITNESSES: AFGHAN HEARING

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1 [a]: What are the prospects for a political settlement of the Afghan crisis at the present time?

[b]: In your judgement, what are the main impediments to a settlement?

[c]: How do you believe these impediments should be resolved?

[a]: I have always believed the Soviets would ultimately leave Afghanistan. I had predicted they would not invade, but had also predicted what would happen if they did. All these predictions have come true. So the Soviets should have listened to me in the first place. Since the famous, landmark statement by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev that Afghanistan is the Soviet Union's "bleeding wound," the Soviets have escalated their efforts to find a way out - with honor -, and, at the same time, undertaken intensive military offensives. These offensives are possibly efforts by the Soviet military to prove it can succeed, and also to intimidate Pakistan. Major Soviet offensives have always been pulled just before each Geneva conference. The next one begins March 2. However, it has not succeeded in over eight years, and, in my opinion, cannot do so in another eight years unless the Soviets initiate an all out escalation, up to one million troops.

Comrade Gorbachev's 8 February speech announced the Soviets would begin withdrawing the 115-120,000 troops on 15 May, if - and this is an Himalayan if - the foreign ministers of Pakistan and the Republic of Afghanistan (name recently changed from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) can settle the mechanics of the withdrawal at the next round of Geneva talks. Gorbachev further stated that all Soviet forces would be out of Afghanistan 10 months after the first troops leave.. Pakistan still holds out for eight months, so a compromise of nine months is possible. All this is contingent on that big if. We can all hope that 15 May will be the beginning of the end of the agony of Afghanistan, but personally I am not too hopeful.

[b] + [c]: Little has been said publicly about the monitoring process, other than the United Nations will probably be the responsible party. But a few helicopters flying along the border can never successfully monitor such a major movement of troops. The Soviets have used hundreds of helicopters in the war, and have not been able to seal the border with Pakistan. Could space satellites monitor? Would it not be possible to march the troops up the hill one day, and back down again, like the Duke of Marlborough of the poem?

On the ground checking will be necessary, and which countries want to take that responsibility, and will such observations be considered violations of Soviet sovereignty or Afghan sovereignty, whoever comes to power? Possibly, only troops from Islamic nations would be acceptable, minus Pakistan and Iran.

Monitoring must also take place along the Afghan-Pakistani border to insure that no new weapons reach the mujahidin after the Soviet withdrawal is complete, or during the withdrawal, if this is agreed upon.

A second impediment is the attitude of the seven Afghan parties which make up the mujahidin (resistance fighters) Alliance in Peshawar. Their ideologies extend from very traditionalist to revolutionary, with many smaller parties in-between. What is needed now is an "Ideology for an Islamic Afghanistan" which will satisfy the majority of the people. A movement is under way among certain intellectual Afghans in Europe and Pakistan to achieve this goal. It must be remembered that the seven parties have followers, not genuine territorial bases of power.

This territorial power is in the hands of the guerrilla leaders inside the country. (Only Yunis Khalis, Hezb-Islami, of the 7 Alliance leaders, has a traditional base of power, in the Surkh Ab region near Jalalabad.) If the other six leaders attempt to assert their influence over their followers inside the country, they may find themselves rejected unless they can accommodate themselves to the local, military power elite which has evolved out of the war.

I shall discuss approaches to the impediments under Question 7. I do not believe in answers; I believe in defining problems and then approaching the problems from within the indigenous cultural patterns. Obviously, adjustments may have to be made as the problems are approached. Flexibility, not answers, is the key.

2-[a]: How do you assess the change in Pakistan's position, where it now says it will refuse to sign an agreement with the Najibullah government?

[b]: How would you assess the chances of getting an agreement on an interim government?

[a]: Pakistan has looked on the successive Afghan governments since the April 1978 coup as less than legal entities, but it has been in contact with them since 1980 at Geneva. However, Pakistan has not had public face-to-face talks with the DRA (now RA). This grew out of a mandate decided upon at the Islamic moot held in Islamabad just after the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Some say that the Zia government wants to keep the war going to insure increased US economic and military assistance. I know General Zia well and simply do not believe this to be true. He - and all Pakistanis - are disturbed because the war has been brought into Pakistan with a vengeance. Bomb explosions and assassinations occur daily. Hundreds of lives have been lost, and much property damaged. Not only Pakistan, but most mujahidin leaders, outside and inside Afghanistan, want to deal directly with the Soviets, not the Soviet puppet regime.

The chances of getting an interim government acceptable to all Afghan political factions is virtually impossible at this point in time. Therefore, I think the timetable suggested by Gorbachev (and his big if) is unrealistic. The Soviet withdrawal and the re-establishment of a free Afghanistan will be more difficult than the US withdrawal from Vietnam. Remember that the USA sat down at the Paris peace talks in 1968, but US troops departed only in 1973, after having "won the war" and left behind a government "acceptable to the majority of the South Vietnamese people" and having trained and equipped an army "capable of taking care of itself."

Gorbachev has already made similar statements in his 8 February speech. For example, he contends that "success of the policy of national reconciliation has already made it possible to begin withdrawing Soviet troops from portions of the Afghan territory." Now actions must follow the words.

He further emphasized that Soviet withdrawal was not contingent on the composition of future Afghan governments, only that they be "independent, non-aligned and neutral." With the Najib government we have reached a plateau of puppet regimes: with increasing repression from Taraki to Amin to Babrak to Najib. Any appointments from now on will probably de-escalate the political processes as the war grinds down. Before Soviet withdrawal, a PDPA party official (or even a non-party member) acceptable to most mujahidin will probably be at the helm, but how long he would last is a question.

Gorbachev in his 8 February speech also emphasized that

whatever Afghan government which comes into being must be "a purely internal Afghan issue." He added: "When, however, it is hinted to us that the Soviet Union should take part in talks on that issue, and even talk to third countries, our answer is firm and clear: Don't expect us to do it; it is none of our business, or yours, for that matter."

This is an enlightened view, consummately to be desired, and held up to the Soviets constantly as a reminder of their policy. But what is ours?

3-[a]: If there is no agreement on an interim government, and Pakistan refuses to sign the agreement, and the U.S. refuses to guarantee it, what implications will this have for achieving a Soviet withdrawal and a peaceful settlement of the conflict?

[a]: Forget it. The war would continue.

4-[a]: Do you believe that the existence of an agreed-on interim government is a sine qua non for the return of all the refugees?

[b]: If the Soviets withdraw, why wouldn't the refugees return?

[c]: What are the prospects for the survival of the Najibullah government after the Soviets leave?

[a]: Yes, but the interim government will be what it says: interim.

[b]: The overwhelming majority of the refugees in Pakistan, Iran, and India will return. However, most of the Western-educated, Western-oriented, Western-reacting Afghan refugees in Europe, North America and Australia will probably not return. Most would feel uncomfortable in whatever form of government is created by a free Afghanistan.

[c]: Nil.

5-[a]: What else, if anything, should the U.S. be doing to improve the prospects for a political settlement in Afghanistan that would be acceptable to the people of Afghanistan, to the Soviet Union and to Pakistan?

[a]: To begin with, the political and military solutions cannot be separated. The way things are going now neither the Soviets nor the Afghans can win militarily, and a political solution is dependent on the continuation of the current military patterns. Tactically, the situation turned around with the

introduction of the Stinger and Blowpipe missiles. And, although the mujahidin can only occasionally stand up to the Soviets in conventional tactics, they still dominate the countryside.

Possibly a good U.S. scenario would be the following.

- 1) - Those interested should increase the supply of weapons in quantity and quality to the mujahidin. The Afghan resistance fighters have shown they are capable of handling Stingers and Blowpipes. Such a move would take another leaf from the Vietnam experience, for the Soviets increased the weapons flow into Hanoi and Haiphong immediately after the U.S.A. agreed to the Paris peace talks in 1968. The Soviet move was a signal to the world that they would support the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong until a political solution could be reached. Those interested in a free Afghanistan can do no less.
- 2) - Keep the diplomatic doors open, including the Geneva talks, which have institutionalized the peace process and must ultimately involve the USSR, U.S.A, Iran and the mujahidin. Currently, only the foreign ministers of Pakistan and the Republic of Afghanistan are involved, with an United Nations representative as "go-between." As of now, the two foreign ministers never meet face-to-face."
- 3) - The end product of the talks will be a time table for Soviet withdrawal, and, more importantly, ways of monitoring the withdrawal to the north and ceasing to arm the mujahidin from the south, a tricky business and the subject of hard, long-term -- but essential -- negotiations.

Some in the West consider the Soviet peace gambit as a ploy, propaganda to gain time between military offensives designed to wear down the resistance, and political offensives geared to weaken the will of the refugees, both external and internal, and to erode Western, Pakistani (and other Muslim) support.

However, in my opinion, the choreography of diplomacy should continue -- along with military supplies -- as long as the Soviets want to dance. A combination of the two will determine whether or not the Soviets are seriously interested in withdrawal.

Attacking the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" and calling their peace feelers "propaganda" does not create an atmosphere for peaceful negotiations. President Theodore Roosevelt said it best: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick."

- 4) - Probably, an extremely important contribution to speeding up the peace process can be made if the U.S.A. and the USSR are convinced to make a joint statement concerning what happens

in Afghanistan after peace is concluded. In general, the statement would emphasize that Afghanistan has suffered horribly from the war, in human, ecological and economic terms (especially in the large-scale destruction of the agricultural sector). No finger should be pointed at any particular nation or internal or external faction responsible. But, the statement should emphasize that both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. would jointly cooperate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economic institutions, infrastructure and human agony caused by the war. Possibly, this is too idealistic a framework to be practical at this point in time, but, if accepted, it might speed up the peace process. It will be the light at the end of the tunnel.

An informal precedent for such a maneuver occurred in the 1960s, when the Soviets and Americans assisted each other in Afghanistan in a de facto if not de jure manner. The Soviets built roads from the north; the U.S.A., from the south. They had to meet. The U.S.S.R. aerielly photographed and mapped the northern one-third of Afghanistan, and Fairchild Aircraft (under a U.S. Agency for International Development grant) did the southern two-thirds. Bench marks had to be jointly placed on the landscape. Other examples could be cited.

Also, the Soviets do not want to leave their supporters vulnerable to mujahidin vengeance, like the U.S. did to the bulk of their Vietnamese allies. An evacuation of hard-core Afghan Communists should not be all that difficult, and those who remain behind would do so at their own risk. Another historical precedent exists. Many Afghans who supported the British during the two nineteenth century Afghan wars (1838-42; 1878-80) left with the British troops when they returned to India.

7-[a]: In your judgement, are the Soviets seriously seeking a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan? Or are they merely making calculated political gestures on the assumption that Pakistan will reject them, thereby enabling them to take the high moral ground, while reducing opposition to their illegal occupation of Afghanistan both at home and abroad?

[a]: A short while ago, I visited an old friend, a Soviet scholar who I had not seen for several years. His first words to me were: "Louis, how can we get out of Afghanistan?," something he never would have uttered before General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost.

In addition, a number of recent articles in Soviet journals have had the following theme: "It was a tragedy that Soviet force intervened in Afghanistan," the actual title of one of the articles.

Are these "feelers" just a "facade," or have the Soviets, af

eight years of inconclusive warfare, decided they cannot win militarily in Afghanistan? Are they actually looking for a diplomatic way out?

In my opinion, we are witnessing one of two patterns: either the beginning of the Second Russian Revolution; or the beginning of the end of Comrade Gorbachev. And if Gorbachev is sincere in his glasnost he has two major foreign policy areas to tackle simultaneously with his internal reform programs. But internal and external will be tough to implement and will take much time and patience.

The two foreign policy items are a meaningful arms reduction package with the West and a solution to the problem of Afghanistan.

Given the current situation in the U.S.S.R., I do not believe the mothers of Leningrad will band together to "bring our boys home from Afghanistan," nor can I conceive hundreds of Soviet draft dodgers forming peace committees in Stockholm. Recently, however, small anti-war demonstrations did occur in Moscow and Leningrad. The police attacked the Leningrad protestors, but ignored the Moscovites. So, given time and casualties, this is not an impossible scenario. During the past year, Soviet media have been reporting the war often in graphic and unfavorable terms.

Also, about 600,000 Soviet veterans of the Afghan war have rotated home, and the stories they tell are of the horrors of war and not always of performing their "international socialist duty."

With Gorbachev's 8 February speech, the Soviets have seized the moral high ground. The U.S. could re-seize it with my suggestions under Question 5; i.e., the joint announcement about reconstruction.

7-[a]: What could be done within the context of a negotiated settlement to improve the prospects for an orderly transition of power and lead to the development of a government in Afghanistan that would be able to govern in such a way as to maintain the independence and neutrality of Afghanistan, while promoting civil order and improving the wellbeing of the Afghan people?

[a]: Wow! If I could answer this accurately, I'd have an inside track for the Nobel Prize. But most of my answers relate to this -- and will be referred to again under Question 10.

8-[a]: Do you foresee any need for an international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan to ensure that free elections take place?

[a]: Yes, see answer to Question 1-[b]+[c]. As the Soviets depart Afghanistan, they must consider other historical parallels. When the British claimed victory and left Afghanistan in 1842 and 1880, they were harassed by Afghan tribesmen all the way back to

British India. Therefore, the Soviets must accept the probability that history will repeat itself. They must realize that the attacks are consistent with Afghan cultural patterns and, hopefully, they will not overact and re-occupy Afghanistan.

9-[a]: In a letter to President Reagan, some members of Congress indicated that they strongly oppose the cutting-off of military assistance to the resistance 60 days after the beginning of Soviet troop withdrawals, on the grounds that it would be a betrayal of the mujahidin. The refusal to cutoff U.S. aid to the mujahidin 60 days after the beginning of a Soviet troop withdrawal would be in direct contravention of the terms of the emerging Geneva agreement. In your judgement, should the U.S. cutoff its military aid at this point? Why or why not?

[a]: Answered under Question 5[a] 1.

10-[a]: What do you believe will happen in Afghanistan after a Soviet withdrawal? Do you believe that there will be a civil war? How would the different groups line up - would it be on a tribal or an ideological basis? Would this situation be worse than what has historically prevailed in Afghanistan?

[a]: No matter what happens, fights for power will probably break out after the Soviet departure, as the Afghan resistance fighters establish regional political pecking-orders. Any government left behind by the Soviets will have a short survival quotient, but any single Afghan resistance group attempting to establish itself in Kabul (the capital) while the regional power struggles are under way, will be ousted by regional coalitions.

When the regional conflict dust has settled, the regional leadership can convene in Kabul to determine what type of government post-war Afghanistan shall have. It is at this junction that the former king, Mohammad Zahir, can possibly perform a valuable, symbolic function -- if the regional leadership agrees. They may not. The former king could announce the assembly of a traditional Loya Jirgah (Great National Assembly), the institution called only in time of acute national stress since Ahmad Shah Abdali (later called Durrani) was elected Shah in 1747 at the first historically significant Loya Jirgah. Having performed a duty which would (in the minds of many) legitimize the Loya Jirgah process, the former king should then fade into the obscurity from which he had been resurrected from his exile in Italy. He would appoint no members to the Loya Jirgah, as kings had done in the past, but regional leaders would debate the future of Afghanistan.

The Zahir Shah gambit continues to cause discussion among the

Afghan refugees and resistance fighters, and it is unclear whether he would be welcome or not -- either before or after the Soviet withdrawal.

The harsh economic fact is that when the refugees return home, they will be "refugees" again in their own homeland because of the ecological disasters caused by the fighting. Also, most refugees in Pakistan were exposed to education, medical assistance and public health information for the first time in their lives, and they will demand any new Afghan government make these facilities available to all. This is where outside reconstruction assistance will be essential.

In foreign policy, the Afghans will return to their pre-1979 stance of bi-tarafi, "without sides," and their new system of government would probably be a federal moderate Islamic republic, with provinces based on several characteristics: major ethnolinguistic distributions, combined with river patterns, lines of communications and commerce, potential regional development, etc. Approximately, seven regions in Afghanistan meet these criteria. (Incidentally, the seven areas generally coincide with the Soviet military zones.)

But what will happen if Afghanistan is deserted by those who are now helping, and the country does finally become a Soviet satellite? Quite possibly, if the Soviet Union is not back across the Soviet-Afghan border by the year 2000 A.D., and, given the current instability among the various ethnolinguistic units in the region, the Soviets could conceivably become the dominant foreign economic and political influence in South and Southwest Asia, without a single Soviet footprint out of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan was never an European colony, but was created as a buffer zone between the Czarist Russian and British Indian empires. In fact, we may now be witnessing Afghanistan's imperialist experience and hopefully it will last only twenty years rather than the usual 200.

History teaches us that aggression cannot be stopped, but it must return to its point of origin. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is no exception.